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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001543

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ: COUP ATTEMPT AVERTED WITH ARREST OF  
"PARAMILITARIES"

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B)  
) AND (D)

1. (C) Venezuelan authorities detained between 50 and 90 alleged Colombian irregulars in the dawn hours of May 9 in the southern outskirts of Caracas. Calling the men "paramilitaries" in his "Alo, Presidente" program, President Chavez claimed the opposition was training them for another coup attempt with the help of the US, Colombians, and Cuban exiles. Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel called on all "friends of Venezuela" to denounce the detainees as terrorists and drug traffickers. Human Rights group COFAVIC expressed consternation with the GOV's lack of proof or legal basis for the detentions, and opposition leaders denounced it as an attempt to smear them and derail the upcoming reparos. The GOV followed the detentions with raids on properties in Caracas, including the embassy warehouse (septel). We can't

dismiss the GOV's allegations that the Colombians were part of an anti-GOV plot -- but the absence of weapons, and more information, raises questions about what occurred. End Summary.

2. (U) President Chavez announced the May 9 early morning capture of at least 53 alleged Colombian irregulars in the southern outskirts of Caracas during his "Alo, Presidente" program. Chavez said that 50 others escaped. Minister of Interior Lucas Rincon later informed the audience that an additional 24-30 had been captured. Calling the men "paramilitaries," Chavez claimed his political opponents had imported terrorists and were training them to overthrow and/or assassinate him with the help of the USG, wealthy Colombians, and Cuban exiles. He also charged that the US was hoping the "paramilitaries" would create a pretext for a US invasion of Venezuela. Chavez said political police (DISIP), scientific and investigative police (CICPC), and the National Guard captured the group during a raid on a ranch owned by Cuban exile Robert Alonso, who is linked to the president's domestic opponents and anti-Castro groups in Miami.

3. (U) Contradicting the president's accusations, El Hatillo Mayor Alfredo Catalan told news channel Globovision May 9 that his police, acting with the Metropolitan Police, had intercepted two buses, reported as stolen, on the back roads of Caracas at approximately 1:3 a.m. They found more than 50 unarmed men, dressed in camouflage fatigues on the buses. Some two hours later, Catalan said, contingents from the DSIP and CICPC arrived and detained the men.

4. (U) Speaking to reporters May 9, Fifth Republic Movement deputy William Lara said the case would be tried in a military court, because the group had planned to attack a military base and steal its weapons to use against the government. According to Lara, Article 486 of the Military Justice Code treats any attack on the armed forces as military rebellion and therefore subject to military justice. Lara also claimed that the detainees planned to attack the military base silently with knives and straight razors to avoid detection.

5. (C) Colombian Ambassador to Venezuela Maria Holguin told the Ambassador May 10 that, at her request, the GOV gave her a list of 4 alleged Colombian paramilitaries who had been detained. The GOV performed a name check which showed that only one person had a criminal record. Holguin was skeptical of the paramilitary accusation. She said not only had the detainees who were interviewed on TV not used paramilitary slang, but also it is unlikely for paramilitaries to move around in large numbers without weapons. Despite being denied consular access to the detainees, Holguin thinks it likely that they are Colombians. But she is highly doubtful they are or were paramilitaries.

6. (U) During a May 10 press briefing, Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel equated the detainees with terrorists and drug traffickers and called on OAS SecGen Cesar Gaviria, the Carter Center, and "all those who are responsible" to denounce the presence and activities of the alleged paramilitaries and thus declare whether they are Venezuela's

friends or enemies. Rangel accused opposition leaders, including military dissident Gen. Felipe Rodriguez, of having met with the Colombian military to coordinate sealing of the border during the alleged paramilitary operation. According

to Rangel, the Colombian military was charged with preventing the FARC from going to Chavez' aid after the attack on the GOV commenced.

17. (C) Liliana Ortega, director of the human rights NGO COFAVIC, told poloff May 10 that there is no clear information on who the detainees are, why they were detained, or what charges they will face. She characterized the GOV raid and the subsequent plan to try the case in a military court as "very strange and confusing." Placing the case under military jurisdiction, she said, will make it much more difficult to obtain a convincing explanation of what happened.

18. (U) Speaking to reporters May 10, pro-opposition deputy Ernesto Alvarenga (Solidaridad) demanded that the GOV publish the names and identity numbers of the detainees, as well as ask the Colombian Government for confirmation of their citizenship status. Alvarenga emphasized that the timing of the raid to coincide with the opposition's May 8 reparo simulation was no coincidence. It represented, he said, the GOV's attempt to link the "paramilitaries" with the opposition, damaging its democratic credentials and distracting it from the reparo effort.

19. (SBU) The GOV followed up on the detentions May 10 with raids around Caracas. Authorities first entered the warehouse complex where the embassy storage facility is located. There, witnesses told RSO, they searched the embassy warehouse and at least one other private facility (septel). The authorities also searched the house of the ex-wife of former President Carlos Andres Perez, and attempted to enter the house of National Assembly deputy Rafael Marin. In addition, they raided a vacant house, allegedly belonging to a National Guard colonel, where hundreds of bullet-proof vests were found, and the house of a person allegedly linked to the February 27-March 5 protests.

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COMMENT  
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10. (C) The timing of this incident, the lack of basic information about it other than GOV assertions, and most importantly, the rush to consign the case to military court with little justification all inspire suspicion. That said, there is a history of conspiring among radical anti-Chavez forces, and so we do not rule out the possibility that someone hired these Colombians to do something against the GOV. If the case isn't merely a "show" as the opposition charges, then the government will have to come up with some convincing evidence quickly. On the other hand, the case could serve as a vehicle for bringing more charges against opposition figures, such as those recently brought against the mayors of Baruta and Chacao. An arrest warrent has just been issued for the mayor of Baruta, Henrique Capriles. Press reports he is detained in DISIP.. For now, all attention is off the reparos and the referendum, a fact that is certainly to Chavez' liking.  
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